

Waiting for Black Superman: A Look at a Problematic Assumption

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Abstract

Black male teachers make up less than 2% of the U.S. public school labor force. A prevalent discourse among educational stakeholders has suggested that Black male teachers are the key to helping students in urban schools develop skills to succeed in school by acting as role models. This assertion presents Black male teachers as a panacea to improving urban schools while ignoring the historical and contemporary contexts that complicate their roles in schools. This study uses life history methods to access the narratives of a group of Black male teachers to shed light on their experiences working in urban classrooms. The purpose of this study is to broaden our understandings about teacher education, teaching, and teacher retention of Black male teachers.

Keywords

race, identity, teacher beliefs, scale construction, urban, social, Black males, subjects, teacher development, urban education, teacher education, racism, social

A prevalent discourse among educational stakeholders has recently suggested that Black male teachers are the key to helping Black male students in urban

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schools and, in particular, develop skills to succeed by acting as role models (Brown, 2012). This rhetoric suggests that by standing in for absentee Black fathers and acting as exemplars of Black manhood, Black male youth will adopt the resilience, grit, and determination to achieve in school. In his remarks to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, Secretary Duncan's (2010) statement exemplified this misplaced ideology:

When I was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, I used to go into elementary schools that did not have a single black male teacher, though most of the students were black and grew up in single-parent families. How can that be a good thing for young children, especially boys? The underrepresentation of African American and Latino men in the teaching profession is a serious problem. And, as we have seen, it is not self-correcting.

On one hand, the Teach¹ campaign has raised public awareness about the underrepresentation of Black male teachers in the U.S. public school labor force. However, the dearth of Black male teachers is not a new trend in the United States and can actually be traced to the school desegregation era (Brown, 2012). In the years following Brown versus the Board of Education, a staggering number of African American male *and* female teachers lost their jobs (Siddle Walker, 2001). As of 1999, there were approximately 50,000 Black male teachers in the U.S. public school labor force (Connor, 2011). Recent statistics report that approximately 2% of 6 million teachers in the United States were Black men (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

However, assertions like that of Secretary Duncan's, present Black male teachers as a panacea to improving urban schools while ignoring the historical and contemporary contexts that surround their roles in schools (Gunn Morris & Morris, 2013). I maintain that embedded within this discourse is a racialized and gendered dominant narrative about Black men. By asserting that national action is required to install men of color in schools to become role models, I argue that much of the rhetoric on Black male teachers presumes that they can, want, and should be surrogate fathers to African American male youth. Moreover, there is an undertone that Black male teachers are all the same. Brown's (2012) notion of the Black male teacher as a pedagogical kind accurately captures a monolithic identity construction that originated in historical stereotypes of Black males. He writes,

The persistent deficit discourse about Black male life associated prominently with the narrative of absent Black fathers, helped to fix in place theories about the Black male teacher's role. In this context, the Black male teacher became a discursively sealed construct, one theorized solely as a father figure, mentor and role model for the at-risk and in-crisis Black male student. (p. 307)

Seemingly, educational stakeholders like Duncan *wait for Black Supermen*—a cohort of soldiers who will use their Blackness and maleness to lead Black male youth to academic success regardless of the structural and systemic challenges they face. Toldson (2011) writes, “It is prudent policy to promote diversity in teaching force, but irresponsible practice to assign roles and responsibilities based on race” (p. 185). I argue that political figures like Duncan and even school administrators have relied upon the misguided concept of Black male teachers as role models to assign them the task of resolving the so-called Black male educational crisis. This rhetoric has emerged without regard to persistent racial inequality in urban public schools that creates challenging conditions for teaching and learning.

An alternative to the Black Superman discourse is one that employs the rich counter narratives of Black male teachers’ experiences working in urban classrooms. Several researchers have argued for the potential of narrative research to shed light on the untold experience of marginalized groups to broaden our knowledge base about teacher education, teaching, and teacher retention (Sleeter, 2001). Furthermore, a growing body of scholarship has focused on the lived experiences of Black male teachers and provided rich insights that challenge audiences to reconsider monolithic perspectives. I discuss selected studies in the following section.

Literature on Black Male Teachers

Recent scholarship on Black male teachers has raised compelling critiques of the discourse on Black male teachers. In this review, I limit my discussion to those studies that addressed the intersections of race, gender, and Black male teachers around two themes: (a) role modeling and (b) pedagogies and practices.

Role Modeling, Race, and Gender

A first theme of scholarship examined the issue of Black male teachers as role models. By accessing the sense-making of Black male teachers through interviews and privileging their voices in drawing conclusions, these studies have challenged widely held beliefs about teaching, race, and gender.

For example, Lewis’s (2007) study—among the first to examine the individual experiences of Black male teachers—used qualitative research methods to understand what motivated the participants to become teachers. Lewis’s findings suggested that the Black male teachers in his study held a deep social commitment to educating all youth—not just serving as role models for Black males. Based on this finding, Lewis offered specific policy

recommendations for school districts to facilitate the recruitment of Black males into teaching such as job fairs and targeted advertisement.

Brown's (2012) study on Black male teachers questioned the ways they are positioned in schools. Drawing upon the historical discourses about Black men and ethnographic interviews of four Black male teachers in a Midwestern school, Brown's study captured the varied ways that the participants understood themselves, their work in schools and the ways they were cast by others. Brown's findings revealed that the Black male teachers in his study were troubled by the expectation that they fill the role of disciplinarian because their Black male students were viewed as lacking discipline. Furthermore, they found that this expectation did not account for the pedagogical work they engaged in with their students as it overemphasized their race and gender as the key factors in teaching Black male youth. Brown maintained that schools officials must not delimit the role of Black male teachers based on their identity and fully recognize their intellectual contributions by allowing for multiple roles in the school.

Another study by Martino and Rezai-Rashti's (2010) set in a diverse school in Toronto used feminist, queer, and antiracist theory to explore an Afro-Caribbean teacher's stance on role modeling. The teacher, Elton, found that while he was initially supported by the school community, he felt pressured to live up to expectations that conflicted with his own beliefs about being a positive Black male role model. For example, Elton approached discipline in a manner that aligned with how his immigrant Caribbean students (and parents) expected. However, he faced limitations when it came to challenging heteronormative stereotypes about Black masculinity. Based on these findings, Martino and Rezai-Rashti called for a disarticulation of the discourse on Black male teachers. Specifically, the authors challenged the use of role modeling as a reason for explaining the potential of Black male teachers' pedagogical practices.

Similarly, Brockenbrough's (2008) qualitative study of 11 Black male teachers working in an urban school district revealed the tensions between monolithic identity constructions and individual identities. The participants described both an awareness of and usefulness in performing their Blackness and maleness in particular ways to foster relationships with students. However, they also identified how these constructions—particularly that of an authoritarian figure—drew animosity from students and strained their relationships with colleagues and school leaders. Brockenbrough (2008) wrote, "While patriarchal gender politics circulated in other realms of participants' lives, their emergence in the predominantly female domain of teaching fueled significant quandaries in participants' experiences as Black male teachers" (p. 338). Like Martino and Rezai-Rashti, based on these findings,

Brockenbrough also challenged researchers to push the boundaries of theory to illuminate the blind spots, that is, underexamined areas, in the study of Black male teachers that emerge through engaging in multilayered theoretical approaches that consider their individual perspectives in the context of essentialist discourses about their work.

Pedagogies and Practices

A second theme that emerged from my review and synthesis of the literature focuses on pedagogies and practices of Black male teachers that support student learning. Lynn and Jennings (2009) contended that the scholarly literature does not sufficiently document the pedagogical practices of Black male teachers and their contributions to society. The authors maintained that Black male teachers support the raced, gendered, and classed learners in their classrooms and that this work is not reflected in the discourse on critical pedagogy. They called for more research that addresses the critical work of Black male teachers in classrooms. A review of the relevant literature revealed that Brown (2009), Lynn (2006), and Milner (2007) are among the scholars who have examined the teaching practices of Black male teachers.

Milner's study bridged the gap between studies on Black male teachers as role models and Black male teachers' pedagogies. His research described how one Black male teacher—Mr. Jackson—fostered a climate of success in his classroom by (a) tapping into peer networks, (b) creating opportunities that linked students' aspirations to in-school learning, and (c) interrupting negative beliefs with positive images. Furthermore, Milner examined how Mr. Jackson's authentic interests in popular culture served to deepen his connection to students. Milner suggested that Mr. Jackson's identity as a role model was one that he had earned through the respect of his students and was not simply based on his race and gender. This study thus advanced the discourse on Black male teachers toward a more nuanced discussion of the particular practices and philosophies that are connected to students' success. Both Lynn's (2006) and Brown's (2009) research also addressed Black male teachers' pedagogical practices.

Brown's (2009) examination of the teaching practices of nine Black male teachers in a Midwestern, high poverty urban school found three different pedagogical types—*enforcer*, *playful*, and *negotiator*—were being enacted by the participants to connect with Black male students and support their learning.

In addition, Lynn's (2006) portrait (Lightfoot, 1993) of three Black male teachers in an urban school in South Central Los Angeles described their commitment to teaching African American students. Lynn argued that racial and gender identity could potentially be productive in engaging Black youth

in the classroom through culturally relevant teaching practices. He argued that based on their own personal experiences, the Black male teachers in this study shared understandings about urban communities with their students and were thus able to connect with students by drawing connections between their students' everyday lives and the curriculum. Lynn's study is contributory to the scholarship on Black male teachers by focusing on their pedagogical practices in urban schools and the ways that race and gender might positively influence their work with students of color.

Literature Summary

These studies probed previously underexplored and undertheorized areas of research within the body of literature on Black males. This research has advanced the intellectual conversation in two ways: (a) by complicating how race and gender frame the work of Black male teachers and (b) by examining the particular ways that Black teachers contribute to student learning through their pedagogies and practices.

Like these scholars, in this qualitative study, I used the lived experiences of Black male teachers to interrogate monolithic generalizations about their roles and work in schools. However, my approach and research design were distinct from prior studies and thus led to new insights about the lives of Black male teachers that challenge dominant ideologies and inform recruitment policies. In the following section, I explain my conceptual framework and research methodology.

Researcher Positionality

Prior to becoming a professor and researcher, I taught English in New York City Public Schools for 8 years. These institutions were similar to many other U.S. urban schools in that they lacked adequate funding for basic resources, were staffed by the least experienced teachers,² and frequently experienced teacher shortage and attrition (Anyon, 1997; Books, 2008; Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2003; Noguera, 2009; Oakes & Lipton, 2007). Black and Latino youth comprised the majority of the student body population, and the majority of the teachers were White and female. I was among the few Black teachers in these schools. In response to this context and particularly because I care(d) deeply about the schooling experiences of students of color, fostering relationships with youth, providing afterschool academic support, and advocating on their behalf to colleagues were some of the ways I supported students in addition to regular classroom instruction. To be clear, I have no regrets for taking these actions nor do I share these examples of care as a means of self-aggrandizement. In his study on

Black teachers, Milner (2012) writes, “Many Black teachers . . . seemed to understand the nature of care, and this care translated into meaningful learning opportunities for students in classrooms” (p. 28). My understanding of care was to bridge the gaps in my students’ schooling experiences. However, I also placed unrealistic expectations upon myself about the sustainability of my practice. In addition, I was engaging in uncompensated work in reaction to working in a school context that lacked the structures, resources and policies to adequately support of color. My decision to leave the classroom years later was grounded in a sense of frustration at a system that under-prepared our students and my complicity in exploiting the ethic of care (Noddings, 1984) among Black women teachers like me.

In the tradition of Black feminist thought, I began with my personal experiences to introduce how I conceptualized a study on the lived experiences of Black male teachers in urban schools. Sprague (2005) writes, “Black women have epistemic advantage because marginalization has distanced them from hegemonic thought and practice and facilitated the development of a critical attitude” (p. 68). I used my own experiences and perspectives as a basis for interrogating how Black male teachers found “ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 9)” that I maintain persists in urban schools. I used the following tenets from Black feminist epistemology as a framework to undergird my query:

In Black feminist epistemology . . . concrete experience and the wisdom developed through it are valued as resources in evaluating knowledge claims. People’s use of stories from their lives . . . is a cue to the wisdom developed through practical everyday experience.

And:

Black feminist epistemology incorporates emotions such as empathy and attachment into the notion of intellect, holding that feeling and caring can usefully guide knowers in asking and answering questions . . . The character and biography of the person advancing an idea are legitimately used to interpret and evaluate the truthfulness of the idea. (Sprague, 2005, pp. 46-47)

Based on these tenets, I committed to thoughtfully attending to the lived experiences of Black male teachers through a qualitative life history study that privileged and honored their voices and sense-making of their stories on teaching. I anticipated that they might share similar perspectives about teaching in urban schools, but I did not assume that discussing the intersection and impact of race and gender would be generalizable across all Black male teachers. Rather, I envisioned their stories as truths about their experiences

that could provide rich and potentially transferable insights into the teaching lives of other Black male teachers.

Furthermore, as a woman researcher interviewing male participants, I considered how the participants might be even less inclined to share with me than with a male interviewer. Thus, in designing of the study, I considered the challenges of collecting narratives from participants who may (a) have been silenced, (b) had experiences that departed from my own, and (c) had stories that proved difficult to tell. These considerations compelled me to use methods that thoughtfully encouraged sharing by participants and careful, close listening on my part. Therefore, I used life history interview methodology (Faraday & Plummer, 1979; Goodson & Sikes, 2001) to document the participants' experiences as Black male teachers and their sense-making of these experiences. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

Research Question 1: What can we learn from the personal narratives of four Black male teachers working in urban schools?

Research Question 2: What implications about teacher education and teacher retention emerge from their narratives?

My choice to conduct a qualitative study to examine the life histories of four African American male teachers in urban schools was guided by an epistemological stance that researchers must honor the individual stories and meaning-making of participants and re-present these findings in their own voices. Maxwell (2005) suggested that understanding participants' sense-making and the context in which their realities are situated as central "intellectual goals" (p. 22) of qualitative research. I felt that hearing, listening to, and sharing out the stories of Black men in the educational system was central to the project of shifting the discourse away from Black men as Supermen. We needed to hear their stories of their experiences in their own words. A qualitative research using life history methods afforded the possibility to achieve that intellectual goal.

Life History Methodology

Life history research is focused on accessing the experiences of an individual across a period of time from his or her own perspective and voice (Plummer, 2004). Faraday and Plummer (1979) wrote,

The life history technique documents the inner experiences of individuals, how they interpret, understand and define the world around them. This understanding can also of course be gained with participant observation, but the focus of life history is paramountly concerned with the subjective meanings of individuals.

Most notably, it comes to lay bare the “world taken-for-granted” of people—their assumptions and what it is they find problematic about their life and their lives in particular. (p. 776)

The authors therefore argued that life history methodology captures the sociohistorically situated experiences of participants in their own words. They distinguished life history from other qualitative methods by suggesting that the privileging of participants’ sense-making of life events accounts for the totality of an individual’s experiences. “[Life history research] is about paying close attention to consistencies and incongruencies at the same time” (Faraday & Plummer, 1979, p. 777). Dhunpath (2010) extended this claim in his essay on educational life history research by asserting as follows:

Educational research has to focus on the self as a living contradiction. It should acknowledge the essential fallibility of human beings, and empower individuals to theorize about their own professional practice as they attempt to improve the quality of their own and others’ learning . . . I want to suggest boldly, therefore, that the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world. (Dhunpath, 2010, p. 544)

Dhunpath asserted that life history research in education enables the researcher to capture the myriad ways that individuals see and make sense of their worlds. Furthermore, he argued that the potential for life history researchers to engage participants in the process of identifying who they are and what they are in their own terms while also having the freedom to change those definitions over time as appropriate to the context distinguishes this methodology over other forms of qualitative research. I concur with Dhunpath’s assertion about the power of life history methodology to privilege the voices of individuals with exceptional latitude and precision. This study contributes to the theoretical potential of life history research by coupling this methodology with a Black feminist epistemological lens. In doing so, the design of the study was also shaped by (a) the nature of the research questions, (b) the attentiveness to fostering and sustaining relationships with the participants, and (c) the analysis and representation of their life histories. I discuss these points further in the following section.

Research Design

This life history study was grounded in interviews in which I used open-ended questions about the participant’s life to encourage detailed storytelling

(Chase, 1995; Mishler, 2004). These exchanges felt informal and resembled a dialogue between the participants and I. Like Mishler (2004), I maintain that my identity played a role in the telling of these stories and I suggest that my positionality as an African American woman/mother/teacher helped foster trust with the men in the study as I learned extensively about their lives.

I adapted Seidman's (2006) process of three-step life history interviews by conducting two 90-min semistructured interviews with each of the four participants from December 2011 to April 2012. I allowed the participants to choose coffee shops that were close to their schools or homes as the locations for the interviews. In the first interview, I combined the discussion of the participant's life history and sense-making until becoming a teacher, and in the second interview, I focused on his present life as a teacher and his sense-making of that experience in the second.³

I used open-ended questions to allow the participants to reconstruct their experiences and build upon and explore their responses. In addition to broad questions, I used probing questions such as "What do you mean by that" and "What was that experience like for you" to further encourage participants to construct their responses. After completing and transcribing all eight interviews (two per participant), I assigned pseudonyms to de-identify any persons or places.

Methods of Analysis

I analyzed the methodically transcribed interviews through close and repeated listenings (Reissman, 1993). Then, I engaged in two levels of analysis: (a) constructing profiles from interview transcripts and (b) chunking texts and finding themes across participants. In constructing the profiles, I kept the exact words of participants whenever possible and made minimal grammatical edits for clarity. I omitted my speech including questions, statements, and utterances. I then returned the profile to each participant for member-checking. Only one participant asked for minor corrections, and I incorporated his feedback into his profile.

In the second phase of analysis, I reread the profiles and looked for consistent themes. Two major themes that emerged from the participants' narratives are discussed in this essay: (a) feeling under-prepared in teacher education and (b) feeling pressured to standardize their curriculum. Based on these themes, I created provisional memos headed by these titles. I ascribed the specific parts of each participant's narrative that elucidated his experience and perception of this topic. Finally, I briefly summarized the excerpt and drew connections, relating the participant's micro experiences to a macro concept that I named *schooling out*. In the following section, I define the

concept schooling out and present excerpts from each participant's narrative as evidence of this process in their lives as teachers.

Setting/Context

The setting for this study was New York City. New York City is the largest urban center in the United States and home to over 8 million residents, of which approximately 25% are of African descent (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2011). Many New York City Public schools are considered urban as they are (a) located in a densely populated, major U.S. city; (b) have a high relative poverty rates as per free/reduced lunch data; (c) predominately serve students of color; and (d) are designated as high need (Russo, 2004). Based on the most recent available statistics, only 4% of New York City's 800,000 public school teachers and 17% of New York City's 1 million public school students are Black males (Holzman, 2010). That is, there are approximately 3,200 Black male teachers for about 170,000 Black male students. One might expect that in a city with a relatively high population of African American people and many predominately Black schools, the ratio of Black male teachers to students would be significantly higher than the national trend of 2%. However, that is not the case. My decision to choose New York City as a research site was purposeful given this gross relative underrepresentation of Black male teachers and high population of Black students.

Participants and Participant Selection

I conducted purposeful sampling to select four rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). To do so, I shared with university and public school administrators and teachers that I was conducting a study about the lives of Black male teachers. They put me in contact with people who might potentially be interested in participating. I selected U.S. born teachers who self-identified as Black or African American and who attended urban schools as students. I also sought participants with at least 2 years teaching in urban classrooms. I wanted to recruit Black male teachers who had potentially resolved the challenges of being novice teachers and had the opportunity to develop their teaching philosophies and practices. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and their ages, place of origin, subject area, and teaching grade level. This is followed by a more in-depth discussion about each Black male teacher in this study.

The Black male teacher-participants had unique personal experiences leading up to becoming teachers. Foremost, their range of experiences in

Table 1. Study Participants.

Name	Age	Birthplace	Subject area	Grade level
Byron	37	California	Humanities	Secondary
Jamel	29	New York	English	Elementary
Justin	26	New York	Math	Secondary
Kamari	24	New York	Math	Secondary

primary and secondary school varied from being tracked in low-performing classroom to being honor students. In addition, their pathways to the classroom countered the traditional model that begins with university education. In fact, all of the participants had jobs in fields unrelated to education as students in undergraduate and some even entered teaching as a second career.

For example, Jamel was raised by a single mother and academically tracked in low-performing classrooms as an elementary and secondary student. After graduating from college, he worked as a computer programmer but felt unfulfilled in his career. Therefore, Jamel enrolled in a New York City teacher education program with an emphasis on special education. At the time of the study, he had been teaching elementary special education for 3 years in Brooklyn, New York.

Justin grew up in a two-parent household and had a strong relationship with his father who was a basketball coach. He had been placed in gifted and talented⁴ classrooms throughout elementary and high school. In high school, he was a star player on the basketball team. Justin moved to Florida after graduation from high school to pursue an undergraduate degree in criminal justice. Upon returning to New York after graduation, Justin was unable to find work. He applied to an alternative teacher education program in New York City and earned his certification in secondary math. Justin had been teaching for 4 years in Queens, New York, when I interviewed him.

Kamari was adopted by his foster mother—a teacher—at 2 years old and raised separately from his biological siblings who were sent to other households. He attended gifted and talented schools and performed well academically in elementary and secondary schools. Kamari graduated high school early and enrolled in a large, Ivy League university in upstate New York where he majored in Africana studies. Like Justin, Kamari applied to an alternative teacher education program. He was teaching math for 4 years in Bronx at the time of this study.

Byron was a former athlete raised in northern California by his mother and grandmother. The youngest of three, he played football throughout elementary and high school. Byron completed his undergraduate degree in northern

California and then earned a scholarship to attend a higher education degree program in Pennsylvania. During his time at this university, he earned his degree and then worked in the office for diversity and retention initiatives. Moreover, Byron became an activist in a Black student group and led students to engage in a series of protests around issues of social inequality. Byron ultimately left the university for New York City to found a nonprofit organization and teach. Byron also earned his teaching certification through an alternative certification program and was in his 10th year as a social studies educator in Brooklyn when we met.

In addition to having divergent career pathways, the participants in this study also discussed entering teaching because they felt that the work could provide them with both a sense of fulfillment and employment stability. However, once these men entered the classroom, many of their initial expectations about how their teaching lives would be did not come to pass. In fact, I maintain that despite the existing discourse about the importance of recruiting and retaining Black male teachers, Jamel, Justin, Byron, and Kamari were effectively pushed out of their classrooms in a process that I name *schooling out*. Two related experiences shaped the schooling out process for them: (a) being under-prepared in teacher education programs and (b) being pressured to standardize curriculum and teaching. I argue that both as teacher education students and practitioners, these Black men were devalued as intellectuals and marginalized in school spaces. As explained in further detail below, these experiences left Jamel, Justin, Byron, and Kamari frustrated to the extent that they were doubtful, and feeling that continuing to work under the conditions they had experienced was unsustainable.

Under-Preparation in Teacher Education

Jamel and Byron spoke of the challenges of their teaching education program, including difficulty dealing with education professors and the lack of relevance to their actual classroom experiences when they became teachers. For Jamel, his issues with teacher education emerged at the end of his degree program, when he realized his major in childhood education had not sufficiently prepared him for the job market. In Jamel's words,

After I graduated, I must have emailed 23 schools for teaching positions and I didn't get anything back because they weren't looking for the common branch . . . Some of the stuff I remember from my undergrad, I can't really apply it to what I'm doing now . . . The preparation courses for the basics, it just sounds good on an interview.

Jamel's description suggested that he did not feel that his learning in his graduate teacher education program was applicable when he actually became a teacher of record. Lacking the real skills to be successful as a teacher, Jamel felt that his preparation was only good enough to teach him the jargon to gain employment. Jamel's experience exemplifies the paradoxical nature of schooling out: He lacked adequate training to be a classroom teacher, and while he was able to gain employment, he was not sufficiently prepared to teach his new students. And while some may argue that many new teachers need several years to transition from novice to proficient, I argue that the lack of preparation has detrimental consequences for Black male teachers such as Jamel who go on to teach in predominantly African American urban schools. These consequences are both personal and professional for Jamel and institutional for his students. That is, Jamel was unable to live up to his own expectation of being an effective teacher and give back to his students. Furthermore, his own miseducation robbed him of the opportunity to experience personal success as an individual. These issues are institutional as well because his lack of preparation contributed to the miseducation of students of color who are in the greatest need of well-prepared teachers.

Another example of schooling out through under-preparation in teacher education was Byron's experience. He found that his coursework lacked relevancy to the urban school context. When he raised this issue in class, his professor was defensive. Byron explained,

One day I get to class and the professor says that the other students were uncomfortable with me and she had to ask me not to be there. She said she knew I knew the material and that I was gonna get a good grade but that the students felt like I was judging them. I went H.A.M.⁵ I checked her and said the only reason she had to do that was because she was culturally incompetent. If she had been doing her job and addressing the issues in special education [within the course], I wouldn't have had to bring shit up.

Byron entered the course with knowledge and conviction about teaching in urban schools. However, the passion he exuded regarding discussing and learning about topics that he felt were relevant to teaching students of color attending urban schools was not well received by his professor. Like Jamel, Byron was schooled out of teacher education by not having access to material that adequately prepared him for his teaching position.

His experience diverged from Jamel's, however, in that he was denied the opportunity to even participate when he was asked to leave the class. Their experiences are indicative of a lack of demonstrated commitment to supporting African American male pre-service teachers despite the national discourse

around the significance of their recruitment. Once the participants entered the induction phase, this trend of inadequate support seemingly continued. In the following section, I discuss how the participants described challenging experiences during the induction phase.

Although the participants were excited about the prospects of finding full-time teaching positions in urban public schools, the lack of support they received from their teacher education program faculty at this crucial stage in their professional careers was contributory to how I am conceptualizing the schooling out process. In the absence of mentoring and guidance at the induction phase, the participants consistently shared that they were not adequately prepared for the job search. For some, the interview was the first time they were asked to reflect upon their career decisions. For example, Kamari shared that writing his application essay made him think about his being a teacher. He explained,

When I started applying, I realized how much I wanted to teach. They asked “What drives you to improve to impact high achievement in the educational system in inner-city schools.” That question stopped me for a second because I was like, “I don’t wanna write this if I don’t mean it.”

Kamari’s retelling of this moment suggested the significance writing the application essay had on his life. I asked Kamari to say more about why he came to the realization that he really wanted to become a teacher so late in his academic career. Kamari explained that it was the first time he recalled being required to deeply consider his philosophy of teaching. I maintain that the induction phase is much too late to be thinking seriously about teaching for the first time. To be clear, I am not assigning blame upon Kamari regarding the fact that this question compelled him to stop and write about his commitment to teaching. However, had he received appropriate support at the induction phase, perhaps Kamari could have been better prepared to respond to this question and transition to his new role as a teacher.⁶ Again, I argue that this lack of preparation is a subtle but relevant example of the schooling out process in teacher education for Black men. In the context of a society in which both institutionalized and everyday racism permeates the lives of people of color, teacher education programs have a responsibility to ready teachers of color for a job market that is likely to be fraught with racial tension by making sure they are knowledgeable about the application process. Kamari’s lack of experience in this area is a subtle but relevant example of the schooling out process because he was not prepared to compete in a market in which he may already face challenges as a Black man. Justin’s experience similarly demonstrates how under-preparation left him vulnerable to being racially profiled during the interview process.

Like Kamari, Justin shared that he realized that he really wanted to become a teacher when he started applying for positions. Justin was able to gain an interview at his neighborhood school rather easily; however, the following excerpt from his interview suggests that the school administration relied heavily on raced and gendered stereotypes in their decision to offer him a teaching position. Justin described,

I went into the office with a panel of other people . . . I'm sitting there at the circle table and honestly for 95% of the interview, we didn't talk about anything academically related at all. What we end up talking about was what I been accustomed to talking about my whole life: basketball.

Justin was initially excited by the school administration's eagerness to meet with him. However, the panel was most concerned about how he would contribute to the basketball team even though he was interviewing for a seventh-grade math position. Despite what appeared to be blatant stereotyping on the part of the administration, Justin did not seem to be perturbed. To be clear, this is not to suggest that Justin was not a talented player who could contribute his skills to the student athletes. However, the focus on his basketball skills and lack of emphasis on his ability to teach, in some ways, perpetuate a myth of the Black Superman by asserting that a Black male teacher's main contribution to education is perhaps his physical prowess. I maintain that the type of racialized and gendered essentialism demonstrated during this interview contributed to the schooling out process as it ignored his potential intellectual contributions to his students.

When the participants entered their classrooms, the schooling out process continued. Like many other new teachers, they began to develop curriculum and form relationships with students. Their narratives also revealed a particular commitment to culturally relevant pedagogy as a means of teaching their predominately African American students. Ladson-Billings (1995) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as instructional practices that include "helping students to be academically successful, culturally competent and socially aware" (p. 477). These practices were demonstrated among the participants in this study. For example, Jamel centered instructional units on Black history; Justin shared his hip hop music in class, played basketball with his students, and drew connections between both and his content; Kamari encouraged his students to self-actualize as they grappled with challenging material; and Byron insisted that his students develop intellectually and spiritually. Based on these and other examples shared by the participants, I argue that their practices aligned with principles of culturally relevant pedagogy that include "teaching to the whole child, equity and excellence, identity and achievement,

developmental appropriateness, and student-teacher relationships” (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 80).

Initially, Jamel, Justin, Byron, and Kamari correlated their culturally relevant teaching practices with positive experiences working with students. However, as the participants gained attention in their schools for being favored by students, they also faced more scrutiny by school administrators. The men faced a range of pressures to abandon their practices and adopt the standardized curriculum. In the following section, I discuss the pressure to standardize curriculum as the second theme in the schooling out process.

Pressure to Standardize Curriculum

A second theme that emerged from this research that contributed to their being schooled out concerned the pressure of these Black male teachers to standardize their curriculum. In fact, the participants believed that the curriculum actually needed to be more explicitly relevant to the students in their classrooms. However, they were strongly encouraged to use the material that their schools had adopted. Jamel and Byron described their schools as hostile environments where the administration hyper-monitored their adherence to the curriculum. For example, Jamel stated,

I see myself as being scripted. They tell you everything you have to say. We have to do stuff with the kids that I don't see benefitting them in anyway. [When I was a kid], the teachers just came in and said, “This is what you have to learn. I'm not going to tell you why you have to learn it . . . Anybody walks in, this is what we are doing” . . . I feel like I am doing the students the same injustice.

Jamel described how he had little decision-making power over what he could teach. Furthermore, he suggested that this material was not helping his students learn. He recalled his own learning experiences as a student in school and drew parallels between his educational experiences and his students'. He realized that he had been miseducated—that is, his teachers taught irrelevant material that was decontextualized and without rationale. Therefore, Jamel did not feel comfortable with his complicity in miseducating—his own students. This excerpt provides a compelling portrait of the ways that the schooling out process constrained Jamel's their ability pedagogical decisions in the best interests of his students. To be clear, I recognize that teachers throughout U.S. public schools face constraints in this era of standardization. However, I maintain that for a teacher like Jamel, who experienced challenges in acquiring an education as a student and then again as a teacher education student,

the constraints he faced once he acquired a teaching position pushed him further out of the classroom.

Another example of a Black male teacher being schooled out was Byron's experience when his school transitioned to a standardized curriculum. Prior to this transition, Byron had autonomy to create and implement his own curriculum. He had been teaching history from an Afro-centered approach for several years and felt that his classes had been engaging, intellectually stimulating, and culturally relevant for his predominately African American students. However, the new curriculum was centered on test preparation for statewide assessments. Like Jamel, Byron felt that the shift to a standardized curriculum conflicted with his own pedagogical philosophy and was harmful to his students. He explained,

The Department of Education (DOE) is changing our school into a traditional school. Everybody at my school has always known that I wasn't no traditional teacher. If you love your kids and are unapologetically black, I don't think you can exist in these schools. With the direction education is going, they're not thinking about understanding the sociological or psychological issues with our children. The shift that I'm watching take place is everybody's adjusting to the injustice. And, I see myself as somewhat of a liaison . . . There's gonna be more high-stakes testing. More standardized, traditional curriculums. More teaching to the test. More of our kids dropping out. And more potential never tapped.

Byron reasoned that the pressure for him and other teachers at his school to shift to a standardized curriculum was forcing him to take part in what he saw as an injustice to his students. He takes issue with "adjusting to injustice" and feels uncomfortable with his role in the classroom. Furthermore, Byron foresaw that the larger impact of standardized curriculum is a generation of Black youth who would not reach their full potential. His reflection about his experience captured the paradoxical nature of the schooling out process. As a Black male teacher, Byron was being schooled out of the classroom himself through the pressure to deliver a standardized curriculum. He was simultaneously schooling out his own students through this requirement to teach material that was not beneficial to their academic development.

A final example of Black male teachers being schooled out emerged through Justin's narrative. Among all the participants, Justin was the only teacher who seemed to be satisfied with his curriculum and his role in helping students learn. He explained,

My principal shared the data for our school. My kids, on the whole, had a much higher passing rate than the rest of the school. Out of the 11 students who took the state math test last year, 75% made gains. The approach that I use is

something that had a positive effect on my students. As a result, the principal moved me from a self-contained class to general ed. If I can broaden that to the rest of my eighth graders who I have this year—the other 60 kids—then maybe something could go well there too. Yeah, there's more people, but they're on a higher level so I don't have to scaffold as much, not spend as much individual time. But again, you know there's a different challenge where that's concerned. So do I think it can work? I'm really sure it can work.

Justin initially referenced his students' outcomes on the standardized tests as an indication of his successful teaching. He emoted pride that his students had made progress relative to prior years on the math test. Furthermore, Justin shared his principal's plan to move him into from special education to general education. To be clear, I do not doubt that Justin was able to able to teach effectively and foster student success in a general education classroom. However, I question the salience of his principal's decision that seemed to suggest that if Justin led students to academic success in one classroom, he should be able to replicate those results in another. In a general education setting, Justin would be responsible for teaching more students, more sections, and likely less adult support. Although Justin may have been optimistic about meeting this expectation, I argue that his reassignment exemplifies an unreasonable expectation to save all students regardless of the conditions. This is yet another example of how Black male teachers in this study were cast as Black Supermen.

Implications and Conclusion

This research tells two interrelated stories: (a) Even though they are discussed in the prevalent literature in monolithic ways, Black male teachers' experiences are not identical and are quite complex; and (b) Black male teachers—even in the midst of being conceptualized as Black Supermen—are undersupported and being pushed out of the very schools that claim to need them so much. The narratives and related experiences of Jamel, Justin, Byron, and Kamari demonstrate the schooling out process that counterproductively addresses a national and local "call" to increase the number of Black male teachers in the teaching force. Beginning in teacher education and in the context of a national policy to recruit and prepare African American male teachers, the participants felt discouraged by the irrelevancy of the curriculum to teaching in urban schools and/or devalued by teacher educators who silenced them in their courses. They shared that both the absence of curriculum applicable to teaching in urban schools and a practice of silencing by teacher educators led them to feel both under-prepared and devalued as community members. These findings are

consistent with other studies on the experiences of pre-service teachers of color in predominately White teacher education programs (Ball & Tyson, 2011; Milner, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). If teacher education programs take seriously the federal initiative to prepare 80,000 African American male teachers by 2015 or even the commitment of honoring diversity that is touted in many school of education mission statements, these programs need to critically examine how their curriculum and pedagogical practices support pre-service teachers of color. Specifically, teacher educators must honor the voices of students of color who are likely to hold valuable insights about teaching in diverse and/or urban school contexts because of their own life experiences in these communities. Furthermore, possibilities for reforming teacher education such as moving the cultural knowledge of people of color to the center of coursework (Pabon, 2011) and emphasizing curriculum and pedagogy to support students in urban schools (Pabon, Khareem, & Anderson, 2011) need to be taken into serious consideration to adequately prepare African American male pre-service teachers, specifically and pre-service teachers of color as a whole.

In addition, the classroom experiences of the participants in this study have implications for the induction and retention of Black male teachers. Once they entered the classroom, I am arguing that a *schooling out* process continued as the participants felt pressured to change their teaching practices and material in lieu of standardized curricula and pedagogies. In summary, these men were at the center of a paradox: They were encouraged to enter the teaching force based primarily on essentialist notions of their racial and gendered identity but were systematically pushed out of the classroom as they began to express dissatisfaction with the standardized curriculum they were being pressured to teach. They felt that this curriculum had little benefit or relevance to students they were teaching. Finally, while they were all cast as Black Superman, Justin faced an additional level of pressure to replicate the success that he had with a small group of students in a special education setting to a larger class size in general education. He was ambivalent about the feasibility of this task.

In follow-up interviews, all four men have discussed leaving the classroom. Thus, while they initially committed to being teachers, they did not feel that their working conditions were sustainable in the long term. These shared experiences suggest that despite the existing discourse about the recruitment and retention of Black male teachers, the participants' experiences in schools were marred by significant levels of frustration that led them to seek alternative career paths. The experiences of the four Black male teachers in this study and their decision to leave teaching lead to significant implications about the preparation and retention of Black male teachers.

A crucial component of teacher education is the induction phase as it marks the transition between being a pre-service teacher and becoming a teacher of

record. Although several scholars have examined the challenges that many new teachers face, there are particular challenges for teachers of color that exacerbate the tensions of the induction process (Achinstein, 2008; Basit, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Scherff, 2008). The findings in this study suggest that African American male teachers had trouble as early as the interview stage in which they realized that they had not been adequately prepared to teach in urban schools and/or were being cast as Black Supermen by school administrators. Therefore, mentoring around the intersectionality of race, gender, racism, and patriarchy must be provided prior to the induction phase to support Black male teachers who are likely to face stereotypical expectations to become Black Supermen in their schools. This mentoring could include critical readings on racial and gender identity as teachers, roundtable discussions on roles and implications of teachers, and mock interviews to help negotiate positions and workload. Perhaps mentoring in these areas might help Black male teachers enter the job market better prepared to resist the schooling out process. Furthermore, research can explore whether Black male teachers entering the field with this level of induction support are more likely to remain in the classroom.

Appendix

Life History Interview Protocol

1. Focused life history on becoming a teacher

"I want to talk about your life up to the time you became a teacher. Tell me in detail the experiences you've had as a Black male child, adolescent and student. Tell me what in these experiences brought you to teaching."

- a. Can you tell me about your childhood? Your parents? Your family and their education?
- b. Can you tell me about your education? Schooling? Teachers?
- c. Can you tell me about a time when x happened in school? What happened? Why does this moment stand out?
- d. What was your teacher preparation experience like?
- e. What led you to teaching? What teaching experiences have you had prior to teaching?
- f. How do you understand what brought you to teaching?

2. Focused life history on teaching

"I want to talk about your teaching. Tell me in detail the experiences you've had as a Black male teacher."

- a. Tell me about your life as a teacher in school as a Black male.
- b. Can you tell me about a significant experience you've had teaching? What happened? Why does this particular moment stand out for you?
- c. How do you understand your present experiences teaching?
- d. How do they relate to your experiences having been a Black male student?

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Notes

1. The Teach Campaign is Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's initiative to recruit, prepare, and place more teachers of color in U.S. public schools.
2. I include myself among this group. I entered teaching with a degree in socio-cultural anthropology and no formal training or background in education. I was hired under the condition that I earn a master's in education within my first 3 years in the classroom. While I fulfilled this requirement, I maintain that I was unprepared for my initial teaching assignment and perhaps learned more from the students than they learned from me.
3. The interview questions are located in the appendix.
4. Gifted and talented public schools in New York City typically require high standardized test scores and teacher recommendations for admission.
5. He got very angry.
6. Kamari did not raise an objection to this point in the member check.

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